



# Barbara Neely

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*She'd never forgotten those dances in her teens where the girls would go in groups, assuming there'd be boys available for them to dance with. Being the blackest had usually meant being the last on the dance floor, rarely for a slow dance, and never with anyone who looked like Stu.*

— Blanche Among the Talented Tenth

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1941
- \* African-American mystery novelist
- \* Author of the Blanche White series

## Biography

African American mystery author Barbara Neely was born in the small Dutch community of Lebanon, Pennsylvania in 1941. Neely, the eldest of Ann and Bernard's three children, attended a Catholic elementary school and was the only child in her class of Dutch-speaking students to speak English fluently. She was also the only student of African American descent to attend her elementary and high school.

In 1971, Neely moved to Pennsylvania where she obtained a master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Pittsburgh. Three years later she became deeply involved in local activism and organized a community-based home for formerly incarcerated women in a suburb of Pittsburgh called Shady Side. Despite her efforts to give these women some hope for the future, local residents opposed the program's presence in their neighborhood. The facility was ridiculed and pressured to move to the inner city. However, Neely successfully fought to keep the program in place.

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# Barbara Neely

## Biography continued

Neely had always dreamed of becoming an author and actually wrote short stories before turning to novel writing. In 1978, Neely received the inspiration she needed to pursue a writing career. After watching an old woman in San Francisco dance in front of a band, Neely was convinced to take her work to the next level. Neely recalls, “She [the dancing woman] started pointing to people, and when she turned and pointed to me, it seemed to me that she was saying, ‘Do it today, because today is all you have.’”

In 1981, Barbara Neely’s first published short story, “Passing the Word” appeared in *Essence*. She then moved to North Carolina where she wrote for *Southern Exposure* and produced radio shows for the African News Service. Later in her career she became a director for Women for Economic Justice, a non-profit organization that helps low income women find housing. Neely was also one of the founding members of Women of Color for Reproductive Freedom and a member of the Jamaica Plains Neighborhood Arts Council.

In addition to her community activism, Barbara Neely is well known for her series of mystery novels about a character named Blanche White. Neely comments about the origin of her character, saying

I started writing and publishing short stories and then started writing a novel that is now buried somewhere in the middle of my basement. . . In the middle of working on that novel I started playing around with this character Blanche and thought “I’d like to write something about race and class that was funny,” but for a good part of the book I was just doing it for my own amusement. Then I got a letter from an editor and an agent both asking me if I was working on a longer work. I told them about the other novel which I thought was going to be the great African American novel and at the end I sort of mentioned about this other thing I was playing around with. They both wrote me back about the other thing so the Blanche books moved to the front of the queue.

In 1992, Neely published her first mystery novel, *Blanche on the Lam*, which was widely heralded by critics. Barbara Neely won several awards such as the “Go On Girl!” Award from the Black Women’s Book Club for the best debut novel, the Agatha Award and the Anthony Award for Best First Novel, and the Macavity award for Best First Mystery Novel. Over the course of the next eight years, Barbara Neely wrote three more mystery novels featuring Blanche White.



# Barbara Neely

## Biography continued

The first thing one notices about Blanche is that she is a very proud woman. She is a middle-aged, heavy-set, dark-skinned Black woman who is in the field of domestic work. Such a profession may seem like an ill fit for such a proud, independent, strong-willed, outspoken woman, but Blanche sees no disgrace in the work she does. She enjoys being in places where she can see how people in power really act and talk behind closed doors. However, this often causes Blanche to become embroiled in the social and political scandals that surround those with whom she comes in contact. Through her quick wits and her fearlessness, she is able to maneuver dexterously through a hostile white-dominated world.

An integral aspect of Blanche's persona is her curiosity and her innate ability to put together the bits and pieces of a mystery. Her experience in dealing with many types of people gives Blanche the capacity to reveal the true intentions behind people's actions and words. In addition to her intuitiveness, she exhibits a feistiness that never ceases when she is intent on finding out the truth. Blanche is a sassy and sexy woman who looks at urban life with blade-sharp eyes.

*Blanche on the Lam* opens with Blanche standing in front of a judge, pleading her case over some bad checks. Barely listening to Blanche's request, the judge sentences her to thirty days in jail. In the midst of some courthouse confusion Blanche escapes and seeks refuge at a home of a wealthy family for whom she was scheduled to work as a housecleaner. On the job, she joins the family and retreats to the countryside expecting a simple life, but instead finds herself in the middle of a mysterious mess of murder and deception.

In Barbara Neely's second novel, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, we again journey with Blanche White through her investigations of a puzzling murder. In this novel Blanche embarks on a ten-day excursion to Amber Cove, a wealthy and exclusive black settlement in the state of Maine. Upon her arrival, she discovers that her dark skin and occupation as a domestic worker are objects of scorn in the predominately light skinned upper class community. Blanche enters the community shortly after the somewhat suspicious death of Faith Brown, a woman known to have been blackmailing several residents in the town. Blanche takes it upon herself to investigate the murder.



# Barbara Neely

## Biography continued

Neely follows the story of Blanche White in her third novel, *Blanche Cleans Up*, where she takes a job as a cook for a local political family as a favor for a friend. She sees a wife's fragile sorrow, a son's estrangement, and a father's unending desire to become the next governor. A string of deaths in the neighborhood all seem to lead back to the family's house. Blanche goes on to resolve what turns out to be several murders connected to sex, disgrace, and heartbreak. All of this is done while she is raising her teenage niece and nephew as her own, and trying to keep their hopes and futures safe.

The invincible Blanche White, now retired from the housekeeping service, returns for Neely's fourth novel, *Blanche Passes Go*. In this story, Blanche's mission is deeply personal as she seeks vengeance from David Palmer, the white man who raped her eight years prior. Using a friend's catering business and a network of informants, Blanche slowly uncovers the history of her rapist, as well as the truth behind the unsolved murder of a young white woman. The novel displays Blanche at her most vulnerable: confronting a horrifying memory and reconciling her past while trying to maintain her life as a strong, independent Black woman.

Barbara Neely's four works of mystery following the pursuits and adventures of Blanche White contain within them significant themes and issues raised for dialogue and contemplation, moving her works beyond the genre of mystery to include political and social commentary. Through Blanche White, Neely questions around standards of female beauty by looking at body size, figure, hair color, and other features.

In her texts, Neely addresses issues of violence against women, such as domestic violence and rape. Her work tackles the subjects of racism, classism, sexism, teen pregnancy and the corruption of government and politics through the main character Blanche White. Her work offers the reader a narrative of our society in the voice of a poor working-class African-American woman -- a voice that is frequently silenced and ignored.

In reference to the genre of feminist mystery Barbara Neely states, "that as a feminist mystery writer it is not enough to create strong women, and that maybe the term 'feminist mystery writer' is being used too loosely." In regards to her own work Neely says, "As a feminist, I set out to develop a feminist character. I think some women characters are called feminist simply because they are strong, or loners, or carry a gun, not because they believe in feminist principles."



# Barbara Neely

## Biography continued

Thus Neely created Blanche White, a feminist protagonist that has been described by critics as “feisty” with a no nonsense attitude to life, work, and various issues of the day. One critic writes about Neely, “In a literary world where women authors of color still create main characters who look nothing like their African selves; in a music world where pop stars croon to video stars who look nothing like any woman in their family; in a glamour industry where ethnic clones of Barbie still rule, what a daring and refreshing change.”

Neely uses Blanche White to expose the problems of color and class difference between blacks and whites. Many critics applaud Neely for tackling subjects that are generally not discussed, such as Neely’s notion of “darkies disease,” a condition in which African American domestic workers succumb to their employers’ so-called concern for them as members of the family.

Leslie Lockhart, literary critic for *The Black Scholar*, asserts that in *Blanche on the Lam*, Blanche both fights “darkies disease” and falls prey to it by emotionally caring for Mumsfield, a character with Down syndrome. Blanche’s seemingly contradictory behavior reveals that she is fighting against racism without sacrificing her compassion for humanity.

Barbara Neely challenges both her characters and readers to transcend conventional ignorance and divisive stereotypes. Neely uses the Black community to illustrate a number of social issues such as homophobia, teen pregnancy, and community activism, while at the same time demonstrating the corruption within the affluent white community. She also explores the prevailing issue of violence against African American women by exposing the hidden history of their rape by white men. Neely does this by revealing that the violence against African American women is not confined to the plantation or its time period.

Neely uses Blanche not only to entertain, but also as a medium to discuss serious societal issues. In effect, Blanche is Neely’s political voice that will reach the mainstream through the genre of feminist mystery writing. She describes her character Blanche, as an “everyday Black woman and as an agent for social change. She is a behavioral feminist!”



# Barbara Neely

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